Seeking Hard Desert Truth

In 1869, three men from the historic Powell expedition vanished. Were they killed by Mormons, Indians, or the unforgiving environment of the remote Arizona Strip?

By Jonathan Waterman
A century and a half ago, Major John Wesley Powell and eight men were 99 days deep in the Grand Canyon and still scared sleepless by the roar of Colorado River rapids. They had launched in May from Green River, Utah, rowing blindly, facing backward in leaky, overloaded rowboats, into violent giant eddies they called whirlpools, pulled ever downward into the tumult of unknown falls and ancient rock canyons, back into shapeless antiquity. Obsessed by this geology, and having passed ruins built long before Christ, Powell felt peculiarly transported—just as boaters feel today in this place. Then as now, traversing the Grand Canyon is like traveling through time.

At the beginning of their expedition, Oramel and Seneca Howland had earned Powell’s wrath by capsizeing and destroying a boat carrying 2,000 pounds of food, maps, and equipment, a mishap that left them faint with hunger and unable to fulfill their scientific research. Later, William Dunn fell into the river and destroyed Powell’s pocket watch. The major—right shirtsleeve pinned beneath the stump of an arm lost to a Civil War bullet—barked at Dunn to pay $30 for the watch or leave the expedition. The domineering Powell might have been a visionary in brokering Native American peace and foreseeing the water challenges of a parched American West, but on the river he couldn’t get along with his own men.

By the morning of August 26, 1869, cap集ines and near drownings had pushed his crew toward mutiny. Starving and facing yet another dangerous rapid, Dunn and the Howlands refused to continue downriver.

They parted amicably, and as the six remaining boatmen saluted the departing trio with gunshots, each group believed the other wouldn’t make it out alive. Powell would turn out to be right. The men never made it to St. George, and what happened on the Arizona Strip, backpacker Floyd Richards joined the list of more than a dozen disappearances.

Traversing the Arizona Strip that Dunn and the Howlands hoped to cross is still quite difficult even a century and a half later. At almost 8,000 square miles, it’s larger than Massachusetts, with only 21 square miles of water, and cut off from the rest of the state by the 277-mile-long, 18-mile-wide Grand Canyon and the evaporative Lake Mead. Culturally, the strip is more influenced by polyglotous Ubarus than Arizona sportsmen. As one of the most remote tracts in the Lower 48, far removed from cell service, its sharp volcanic rocks eat tires and deter all but the hardest four-wheelers. If you’re foolish enough to visit in anything but dry weather, you’ll find the rain transforms dirt roads into quagmires, while steep rocky washes become mud traps capable of stranding even tanks for days.

Shivwits Plateau sticks a crooked middle finger into the Grand Canyon, forcing the great west-flowing river into its southernmost loop. On a perfect October day in 2016, we bumped and rocked our way south, aiming for the rim of the Grand. Bushwhacking and then scrambling down encrusted Kaibab limestone and across a bighorn trail, we emerged onto the highest valley in Separation Canyon’s east fork. My arms and legs were quickly bloodied from whacking through juniper, piñon, and thorny mesquite; my companions, David Schipper and Chris Pietrzak, were unscratched at first, but by afternoon a cactus spine had embedded itself deep into Chris’s calf.
Although we had expected a pleasant trek down, the route became complicated. At several crucial points, we followed tiny cairns marking loose traverses and steep down-climbing. Without the aid of a trail or its markers, without food or water, it’s hard to imagine 19th century mountain men, let alone modern canyoneers, exiting the Big Ditch without paying a steep mental and physical toll.

Down in Separation, by the end of a 75-degree day, we were parched. I’d started out carrying two gallons of water, but drank half as much again from old rainwater puddles. That evening, as David and Chris hunted for scorpions in our campsite, I headed down-canyon. Running water was nonexistent. While Dunn and the Howlands slaked their thirst from puddles as I did (tree rings and Powell’s river journals show that 1869 had been a wet year), their deerskin and wool were entirely unsuited for the August heat. They would have tied clothes around their waists and still sweated profusely. Without protective sun clothing or lotion, their skin would have burned like the redwall limestone imprisoning them.

As darkness fell, I turned on my headlamp. But Powell’s men lacked torches, and if they chose to travel in the cooler night air they would have stumbled painfully through an arboretum of cacti—16 species worth—as in the last days of August 1869 the waning moon was only half full.

At 36, as the oldest member of the expedition, Oramel Howland would have led his charges up the canyon like “a mad King Lear” (as Powell described him). Seneca, 26, quiet and pensive, got along with Powell, but didn’t want his half brother to depart without him. Little is known about Dunn, 24, but he had greasy hair hanging down his back and, as the major put it, “a sublime contempt for razors.”

Rowing and portaging the snowmelt waters of the Colorado River—after their earlier hunting trips in the cool Rockies—would not have inured them to this antithetical desert biosphere. Edible plants are scarce. There are lizards and elusive packrats, but game abandons the summer canyons for the plateau grasslands, and bighorn sheep, as they’d learned in frustration over the past months while transiting the river, often lay beyond rifle range.

During open bivouacs encamped with stinging, venomous critters, their long beards blew sideways in the eerie hot blast of rising air, pushed by cooler air below and audibly howling up this canyon until the dawn—as it has blown for millennia. For Dunn and the Howlands, Separation Canyon was an objective to be vanquished rather than nature to be admired. In the minds of 19th century pioneers unburdened by romantic thought, wilderness reigned with malevolence. As I stumbled alone back up the canyon, I appreciated how desperate they would have felt, with little water, no food, intense heat, and nothing but the unknown above them.

Separation Canyon is no simple gorge. Although only 30 miles from river to rim by our route, it splits into labyrinthine west, main, and east forks—each twisting up into a half-dozen narrow sub-canyons. Finding one of the two exits in the furthest east canyon would have demanded repeatedly climbing confusing look-alike canyons only to be stymied by dead ends of vertical rock.

Their tongues revelled in their throats. Their heels blistered. Mosquitoes harangued. More than a half-dozen exit attempts would have cost them two dozen miles of route-finding—certainly causing debates leading to arguments and more anxiety-heightening exhaustion. After a few days of running this maze, they would have been even more weakened and dehydrated—physically cooked by the Arizona Strip, perhaps cramping and nauseous, perhaps on the edge of heat exhaustion, followed by fever and the elevated pulse of heat stroke, which can kill the fittest athletes within an hour.

In two long days—one taking a wrong turn until corrected by our GPS—we backtracked to the rim, chastened. Cutting through this dense and featureless forest on a different route by compass after our GPS batteries died, we climbed a knoll in hope of spotting the road. A long silence reigned as we imagined getting lost in these dense woods cut by jagged washes, downed trees, spiny gardens, and boulder fields. Then we spotted the Kelly Springs road a half-mile away. Our relief to be back on track was tangible. If Dunn and the Howlands made it this far, they would have found the Indian trail leading off the plateau. Atop this basalt stratum, pale potsherds lay at our feet, littered with burnt-orange, thumbnail-sized chert fragments, carried here over the millennia by Native Americans to be knapped into...
community believe that it’s fake, the inscription felt across a sea of juniper. Although many in the Grand Canyon top, it took us three hours to find the inscription, scratched onto Mt.

What happened to the three after they left Mt. Dellenbaugh has been debated in riverside campsites, university classrooms, and the dens of historians for generations. We do know that in early September 1869, less than two weeks after the separation, the men were reported dead at the hands of the Shivwits. When Powell returned to the area a year later with a Mormon translator, the Shivwits confessed, saying Dunn and the Howlands were mistaken for three men who’d raped an Indian woman and killed in retribution. But after the recent discovery of a cryptic 1883 letter found in a trunk in southern Utah by a retired biology professor, others argue the men were killed by Mormons who thought they were federal spies. This alternative hypothesis was reported by the Salt Lake City Tribune, then spread around boater campfires, across the web, in books about Powell or the Colorado River, and within a chapter of the best-selling report—I now firmly believe that Shivwits killed Dunn and the Howland brothers.

The 1870 confession to Powell spoke of “killing Powell’s men with arrows.” Then, in 1902, Toab bragged of the killing to a Shivwit named George Brooks that Toab, Jim, and Tamanam then “ran and hid.” Toab was later caught vandalizing springs, cattle trails, and fences and eventually served time in prison for murdering another Paiute. In 1923, a Shivwit named Simon, who was a boy when the killings occurred and now most who’ve studied this small, tragic chapter in Western expansionism—occlude our understanding of Dunn’s mark in the 1890s.

The truth of the killings is buried in time. Rodents were never found, and scratches on a rock are some of the last hard evidence of their passing. But I have consulted historians, combed archives, read books and transcriptions of oral histories, and studied the 1883 letter. I’ve found multiple sources that point to the truth, and as I stood atop Mt. Dellenbaugh, confronting Dunn’s final signature, I knew that the Mormons did not kill Powell’s men.

Six months later, on September 1869, I believe that Oramel mistakenly allowed the Shivwits to carry their rifles to trust Oramel mistakenly allowed the Shivwits to carry their rifles to trust Oramel mistakenly allowed the Shivwits to carry their rifles to trust Oramel mistakenly allowed the Shivwits to carry their rifles to trust Oramel mistakenly allowed the Shivwits to carry their rifles to trust Oramel mistakenly allowed the Shivwits to carry their rifles to trust Oramel mistakenly allowed the Shivwits to carry their rifles to trust Oramel mistakenly allowed the Shivwits to carry their rifles to trust Oramel mistakenly allowed the Shivwits to carry their rifles to trust Oramel mistakenly allowed the Shivwits to carry their rifles to trust Oramel mistakenly allowed the Shivwits to carry their rifles and the traps. The three, named Toab, Jim, and Tamanam, had led the men the previous night at Parasail Springs, a few miles from where the butt of Dunn’s rifle was found in 1993. Seeing an opportunity, and wanting revenge for the 1866 tortures and murders of Shivwits at the hands of Mormons, the Indians unshouldered their bows. Juniper arrows tipped with chert rained into Dunn and the Howlands. As each white man fell, defenseless, the Shivwits continued to draw, pull, and shoot.

The 1883 Mormon letter, which referred to “the killing of three” in a town called Toquerville north of St. George, is flimsy evidence at best. That the bedraggled, emaciated men would pass the area’s largest settlement for a small village 10 days after leaving the river only to be killed there by suspicious Mormons is far less plausible than what the Indians themselves admitted. After digging deep into historical records—including letters from ranchers and testimony from Indians, all of which corroborate the original report—I now firmly believe that Shivwits killed Dunn and the Howland brothers.

They had killed Powell’s men with arrows. After digging deep into historical records—including letters from ranchers and testimony from Indians, all of which corroborate the original report—I now firmly believe that Shivwits killed Dunn and the Howland brothers. Their bodies were not buried,” said Simon, but rather were left for coyotes, Brooks reported in a letter. Three men had been murdered near Parasail Spring. "The men let the Indians carry their guns and other traps. They left the spring in the morning, got out a half-mile or more, when the Indians attacked them. It was a running fight—bow and arrows were used," Dellenbaugh wrote in a letter. Three men had been murdered near Parasail Spring. "The men let the Indians carry their guns and other traps. They left the spring in the morning, got out a half-mile or more, when the Indians attacked them. It was a running fight—bow and arrows were used," Dellenbaugh wrote in a letter.

Trails continued to lift air out of the great, prehistoric charm of the Grand Canyon below. We left Dunn’s inscription and headed down. Below the cinder cone summit, we walked around crumbling ruins built of black basalt, the same that Dunn would have passed in 1869. Above us, gray storm clouds scudding. It was a landscape just as harsh and unforgiving as 150 years ago, or, 1,500. It was also a place that kept its secrets, but not all of them, well.